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The Arrowsmith Battlefield

Mysterious 'Missing Link' in Illinois History

ILLINOIS HISTORICAL SURVEY



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THE ARROWSMITH BATTLEFIELD

MYSTERIOUS "MISSING LINK"
IN ILLINOIS HISTORY

BY
WM. B. BRIGHAM
BLOOMINGTON, ILL.

ILLINOIS HISTORICAL SURVEY



McLean County Academy of Science Expedition.

THE ARROWSMITH BATTLEFIELD

By WILLIAM B. BRIGHAM

Soon after their first contact with the French in Wisconsin, the Fox Indians began to develop a feeling of distrust and suspicion which broke out later in hostilities that proved very detrimental to trade and settlement over a vast area of New France. The Foxes were a sturdy race—self-reliant and revengeful; cherishing their vengeance long and venting it when the moment seemed opportune. After a great many years of unpleasant relations with this tribe, the French authorities were able to secure the assistance of other Indian nations to aid in their destruction.

A decisive battle between the Foxes and French (aided by other Indian tribes—enemies to the Foxes) was fought in 1730. This battle, lasting twenty-three days, is recorded on the pages of history, but writers have not been able to tell definitely the location of this fateful struggle. Some historians have said it probably was fought near Starved Rock, while another has it placed (some thirty-five miles to the northeast) not far from Plano in Kendall County, Illinois. None of these locations has been satisfactory to historians because of conflict with the official reports. The best authorities have located it on the uncharted prairies with no nearby landmarks. Under such circumstances, only a careful analysis of all available records and situations will reveal the true site of the battle.

At that time, distance and directions could only be given approximately, yet they are definite enough to be of great value in locating this battlesite when other official reports and local records are examined and compared. The location is plainly designated in a statement made by Hocquart, Intendant of New France, who was at Quebec. On receiving the messengers direct from the scene of action, he reported to the French minister as follows: "I have no doubt, Monseigneur, that you have learned, by way of the Mississippi, of the defeat of the Renard savages that happened September 9, last, (1730) in a plain situated between the River Wabash and the River of the Illinois, about sixty leagues to the south of the extremity or foot of Lake Michigan to the east, southeast of Le Rocher, in the Illinois country." (Le Rocher is French for "the Rock"—now known as Starved Rock.)

This story* and the facts given here, I believe, conclusively fix the scene of this battle at the long unidentified "mysterious battlefield" in eastern McLean County.

On the Jacob Smith farm two and one-half miles southeast of the village of Arrowsmith, McLean County, Illinois, are a few scattered trees. This is the remainder of what was formerly known as Little Grove, and is now known as Smith's Grove. The head waters of the Sangamon River flow along the south and southeast of this group of trees. To the north and northwest, there is a hill which rises to an elevation of about twenty feet above the level of the river. The first settlers of this community noticed that there were many depressions and ridges on the top of this knoll, and they were then supposed to be remains of Indian pits or caches. These were said to be irregularly shaped and irregularly placed with the greatest depth not over two and one-half feet from the tops of the ridges to the deepest part of the depressions.

The following is an excerpt from a discussion of "The Arrowsmith Battle Ground" written by Captain John H. Burnham and published in the Transactions of the Illinois State Historical Society in 1908: "One beautiful day in May, 1897, a party consisting of several pioneers of eastern McLean County and a few of the members of the McLean County Historical Society made a very interesting exploration of the central attraction of the grove, and we shall never forget our intense interest as we made our discoveries. We dug into four or five of the dozen or fifteen of the pits or depressions, which were scattered irregularly over the acre of land at the top of the little knoll, and found the apparent bottoms of these pits at depths not exceeding three feet, and mostly two feet from the apparent average natural level of the ground.—Bones were found in nearly all of them, but they nearly all appeared to be bones of animals."

On several occasions Captain John H. Burnham and Judge H. W. Beckwith of Danville had together investigated places that appeared to be of historical significance. Thus, it was only natural for Captain Burnham to write to his friend at Danville telling him of the 1897 expedition to the Arrowsmith battlefield. Judge Beckwith answered as follows, under date of December 3, 1897:

"Dear friend Burnham:

"I am glad to hear of the finds over on the Sangamon. This may be the missing link in Illinois history. I trust the search will continue until relics are found that will prove conclusively whether the combatants were French or Anglo-Americans.

"Expeditions were sent out from Ft. Charters prior to 1735

against the Fox Indians. Also forays were made from Kentucky into that region around 1812.-----”

The Illinois State Historical Society was organized in 1899 with Judge Beckwith as president. At the first annual meeting Judge Beckwith outlined the great work to be done by historical societies in Illinois: “Your chairman cannot too forcibly urge the necessity there is to localize many of the recorded events in our early State history. To illustrate:

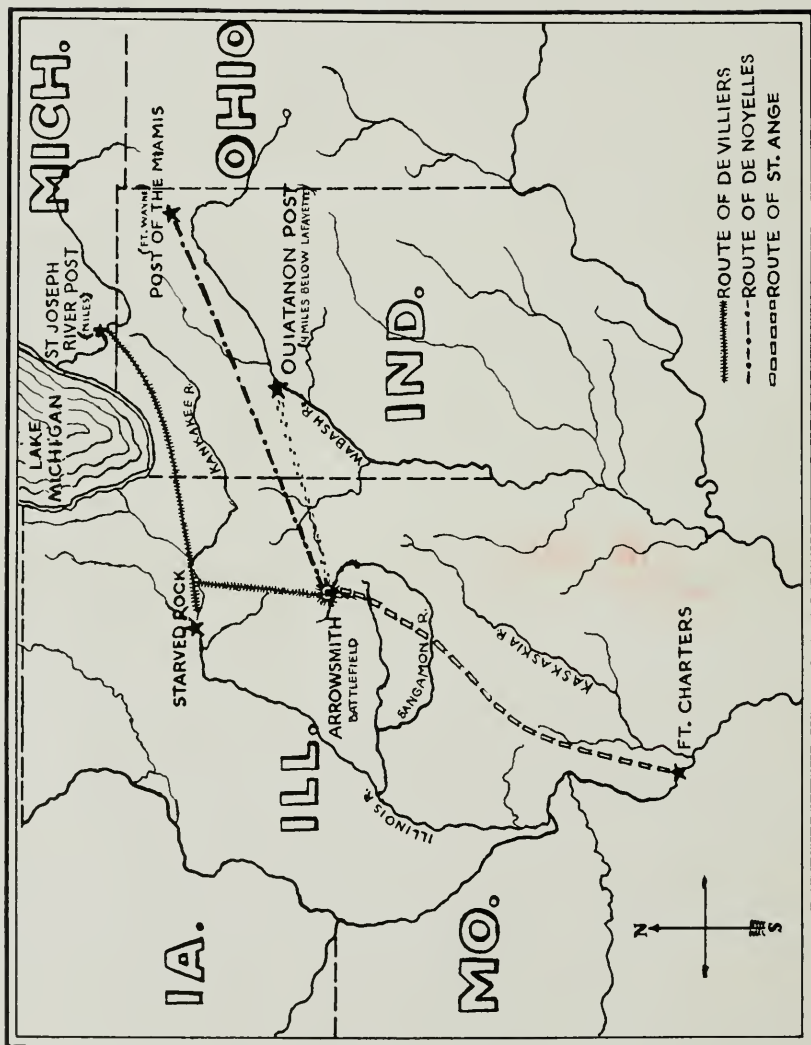
“Among the expeditions sent out from Fort Charters to chastise the Sak and Fox Indians, always enemies of the French, was one that found and defeated these savages entrenched towards the sources of the Sangamon river. Now if our zealous friend, Captain Burnham, and his industrious associates, can identify this battle ground in McLean county, as your chairman hopes they may, it will be an ample reward for the historical society at Bloomington.”

Judge Beckwith passed away in 1903, and Captain Burnham, busy with other activities, did not follow the details to a definite conclusion.

Some articles collected from the above site, either at the time of the 1897 expedition or by residents of the community over a period of previous years, were presented to Captain Burnham and were given by him to the McLean County Historical Society in Bloomington. They included two hundred bullets; three knife blades (which may have been scalping or dirk knives); various copper ornaments; a piece of pistol barrel; parts of nearly straight deer-horn prongs; part of a link of an iron chain; a peculiar piece of iron (flat-scraper on deer skins); a part of a gun barrel which had also been flattened, probably for use as a scraper; a gun lock; a steel blade (possibly the blade of a dirk knife, but more likely a razor blade on which the maker's name, Pierre Minan, could be read.)

Another interesting fact in connection with this “battle site” is this: About fifty rods to the northeast, on the downward slope from the hill, early settlers of the community noticed what appeared to be rifle pits. They were laid out in the manner of an old-fashioned rail fence. These earthworks were evidently made in haste for they were not dug to a great depth. Though plainly visible before cultivation of the prairie effaced them, they can no longer be seen on the surface of the ground. Pits similar to these were found across the river to the south and southeast of the grove.

During the years in which the surrounding land was cultivated, great numbers of bullets were found. Most of them were discovered



The Section of "New France" Involved in the Conflict.

near the grove, outside of the location of the pits, and in the direction of the trenches to the northeast and to the south. However bullets have been picked up in great numbers for a distance of nearly one-half mile in the southern direction. The bullets are of large size and many have the appearance of having been hammered into form from bar lead. The type of these bullets suggests a remote date and their surface coating of patina indicates a long exposure to the elements. It is also interesting to note that on some occasions when wood from this grove was being burned in an open grate, melted lead was observed trickling from the fire. In 1906, while a large oak tree from this grove was being sawed into lumber, the saw cut through a bullet of the type mentioned above. The bullet was near the heart of the log, which was four feet in diameter. We greatly regret that no one, at that time, thought to count the rings of growth to the surface.

In June 1932, Mr. Frank W. Aldrich, who was present with the party that had investigated this site with Captain Burnham thirty-five years before, together with myself, and several young men, visited this spot with the hope of gaining further information. At this time, there was no trace of anything unusual on the surface. Our excavations on the hill revealed numerous workings of the soil to the depth of about two and one-half feet. Charcoal, bones, teeth, an arrow, and a bullet were found, but we were unable to locate the outline or extent of the early pits or fortifications. It was interesting, however, to visit with the members of the Smith family, who have resided there and tilled the soil since the prairie sod was broken. They have not only gathered quantities of bullets, but in the regular farming routine have recently unearthed numerous relics, including six traders' axes and a gun barrel. Nothing was of as much interest to me as a statement from one of the young men relative to a zigzag ridge which had been visible until recent years. He stated that this ridge approached the hill from the northeast, but that continuous cultivation of the soil had entirely obliterated it.

The McLean County Academy of Science became interested in the battlefield. On May 12, 1934, a large group of members and friends visited the site and made excavations. A more systematic investigation than any of recent years was planned. One trench dug across the hill in a northerly direction revealed the definite locations of ten of the pits. Worked soil, bones, and charcoal were the indications in each of these pits. Other objects of interest found

at this time were a piece of sheet copper, on the apparent bottom of a pit thirty inches below the surface; a number of bullets; and a short section of a gun barrel. With the historical facts before them, the party contemplated the local setting, and returned home feeling satisfied with their efforts.

The silent remains of this field speak in perfect harmony with this story which is made up from the historical records of the events:

The Foxes were continuing their depredations against the French and their savage allies. The overt act was the burning of the son of the principal chief of the Illinois tribe. The chief's followers immediately arose against the offenders. The Kickapoos, Mascoutins, and Illinois of Le Rocher (the Rock) made themselves masters of the passes to the northeast. As a result of this careful guarding, the Foxes, who had planned to find refuge for their women and children among the Iroquois, were forced to give up the northern route leading to the East. They then built a fort near the Rock, a league below the enemy. This fort would, undoubtedly, have been the location of the final battle had the Foxes not decided to take the southern route to the east—the trail which followed the Bloomington moraine. Leaving the fort near the Rock, they started, with their women and children, southward. The Illinois warriors followed and harassed them at every opportunity. When the Foxes paused and built a fort (near the present site of Arrowsmith), the Illinois, with others, dug in on a hill on the prairie where they could watch and have protection. Messengers were sent out by these watchers to the various French posts.

St. Ange was notified at Fort Charters. He put himself at the head of the French there and started in the direction of the Fox fort. On August 10th, 1730, they joined the three or four hundred savages who had preceded them by a few days. On the 12th, scouts who had been sent ahead reported the location of the fort to St. Ange. The march continued mostly through a wooded country and at daybreak on the 17th they came in sight of the Fox fort. According to the report: "This was A small Grove of trees surrounded by a palisade situated on a gentle slope Rising on the West and North west Side of the bank of a small River, in such manner that on the East and South east Sides they were exposed to our fire. Their Cabins were very small and Excavated in the earth Like the Burrows of the Foxes from which they take their name." St. Ange's men opened fire at once. After the firing began, the Illinois and others who had been watching from the nearby hill, joined them.

The Foxes made two unsuccessful sorties during the day. St. Ange camped to the southeast of the Foxes on the opposite side of the river where that night trenches for fortification were dug. Later redoubts were constructed within two pistol shots of the enemy. These were designed to prevent the enemy from obtaining water, but the Foxes cleverly excavated underground passages leading to the river.

De Villiers, commander at the post on the St. Joseph River (Niles, Michigan), reports: "I had the honor of sending you a report on my first journey to le Rocher, with the nations to prevent the renards (Foxes) from passing over to The Iroquois." On August 6th, two Mascoutin messengers came to De Villiers and stated that the Renards had struck the Indians of Le Rocher. The Illinois, seeking revenge, pursued them. After a day's battle, the Renards, with their families, took possession of a small grove of trees and fortified themselves. Mention is also made in De Villier's report of "Watchers" who dug in on a hill on the prairie. "On the following day, they parleyed with one another to gain time and to obtain assistance. During these parleys, the Pouatoutamis (Pottawatomies) sent Papissa (an Indian runner), with a young man to the Ouyatanons (near Lafayette) to ask aid of the tribes and the French at that post." Fox messengers were also there trying to bribe the Ouyatanons to help their people by keeping the road to the East open. The Ouyatanons promised they would assist the Foxes and assured them they would soon see them.

De Villiers, having sent word to the French at Detroit and to De Noyelle of the Miami post (near Ft. Wayne) left his post August 10th, 1730. He took with him the French and Indians of that locality and proceeded toward the Fox fort. On the way, he was joined by the Kickapoos and Mascoutins (of Le Rocher). He arrived at the encampment of the Renards August 20th and took charge of the combined forces. His description of the fort is as follows: "The Renards' fort was in a small Grove of trees, on the bank of a little river running through a vast prairie, more than four leagues in circumference, without a tree, except Two groves about 60 arpents from one another."

The Ouyatanons arrived the same day but it was soon apparent that they were unwilling to completely break their promise to the Foxes. They tried many times to persuade the enemy to spare the lives of the Foxes.

De Noyelle, with the French and Indians from the Miamis, arrived on the scene the first day of September. He joined De

Villiers' men on the right of the Fox fort. The governor of Canada sent a message by De Noyelle which forbade the making of any treaty with the Foxes.

Altogether the French and Indian warriors now numbered about fourteen hundred. Much privation and suffering on the part of both the Foxes and the enemy forces caused some desertions. However, the siege lasted twenty-three days.

On September 8th, an hour before sunset, a violent storm arose. The night came on very dark and foggy, and the Foxes, taking advantage of this started off across the prairie towards the southwest. The French, hearing the crying of the children, were aware of this attempt, but they could not follow them until the next day when the Foxes were overtaken and almost completely destroyed.

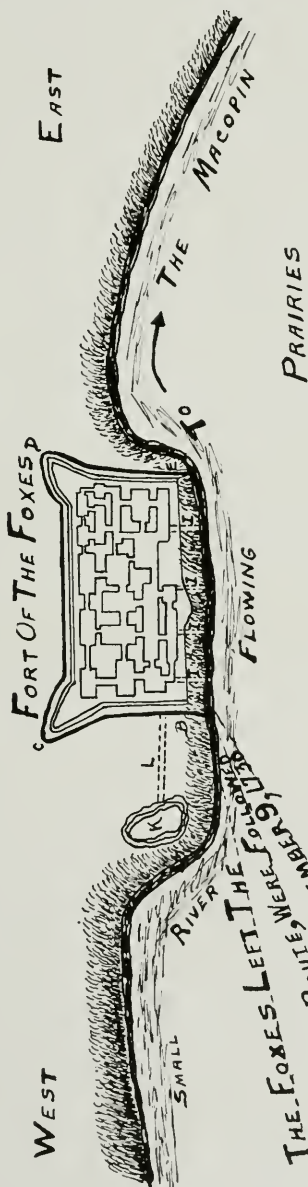
De Villiers at once prepared his report and sent his son, Coulon, and Pierre Reaume, a Fox interpreter, who had been in the West many years, to carry the message to Hocquart at Quebec. Hocquart states that he questioned the son on all the facts of the report and got some details that had been omitted. He also gathered the expressions of Reaume which were according to Canadian usage. Chaussegros de Lery, chief engineer in building the walls of Quebec under the direction of Vauban, was called in. From the report, he drew up a plan of the battle with notes on the same.

In our description of this battle many interesting details have necessarily been omitted. However, we have included incidents and conditions that aid definitely in determining the location of this conflict. To that end, a summary of our findings, with the conclusions, follows:

1. Notes on De Lery's map state that the scene of the battle was east by southeast of Le Rocher. Two reliable messengers, Coulon de Villiers and Pierre Reaume, have said that the battlefield was located between the Illinois and Wabash Rivers, and about sixty leagues south of Lake Michigan. This is the approximate location of the Arrowsmith field.
2. Observations of the early settlers of Arrowsmith point to the following facts on De Lery's map: the pits on the hill and the trenches to the northeast and the southeast. At this place, the Sangamon River flows east as is shown on De Lery's map. The trench opened by De Villiers to approach the hill showed for many years as a zigzag ridge from the northeast. The complete confirmation of the character and location of the pits on the hill

PLAN OF THE FOX FORT LOCATED
BETWEEN THE ILLINOIS AND WABASH
RIVERS, ABOUT 50 LEAGUES EAST
SOUTHEAST OF LE ROCHER (STARVED ROCK)

PRAIRIES



SCALE FOR 200 FATHOMS



GT-CM

MADE AT QUEBEC
OCTOBER 15, 1730
Chauflégnys de Lery

De Lery's Map (Translated)

has been brought about by three groups of investigators who have been interested in getting the exact facts.

3. The two sorties against St. Ange left many bullets for some distance to the south of the fort. This has been verified by the finding of many bullets in this area. Hundreds of crude patina-coated bullets were found. They compare exactly with the type that belongs to the period of this battle.
4. The Foxes wished to go east to the Iroquois. The passes to the northeast were held by enemies and to avoid the swamps, they were seeking the regular trails along the higher ground. This search brought them along the route which was in the vicinity of the Arrowsmith field.
5. When the distance traveled and the length of time taken by each of the armies to arrive at the battlefield is considered, there is added evidence that this is the site of the battle.
6. The two following statements of St. Ange and De Villiers are true of the natural setting of the Arrowsmith field: "A small grove of trees on the bank of a little river running through a vast prairie" and "On a gentle slope rising to the west and northwest on the bank of a small river."
7. Confirmatory to our findings is a letter from the French Commander at Detroit in 1752, which states that certain tribes had built a fort on the prairies of the Mascoutins, at the place where De Villiers had attacked the Foxes about twenty years before. This location is without a doubt, the hill five miles to the southwest of the Arrowsmith field where the Illinois and other tribes dug in and watched the Foxes. Messengers were sent out from there. It is positively known that a stockaded fort was located on this hill as late as 1812.
8. The view of the Arrowsmith field shown by the accompanying photograph from the air is easily recognized as the same scene shown on De Lery's map.
9. There is no evidence that the battle was fought elsewhere.

There were indications of a battle-ground near Plano. John F. Steward's boyhood home was near the location and he became greatly interested in identifying it. Sending to France, he secured several manuscripts in 1901. He, at once, interpreted them to show that the unlocated Battle of 1730 was fought there. A few years later Mr. Steward received copies of De Lery's maps of the battlefield, but he found difficulty in applying them to the Plano site.

Recently Stanley Faye, by discrediting the official reports, has placed the battlesite east of Lowell on the Vermillion River. This location deserves about the same consideration as Steward's Mara-mech Hill.

With landmarks remote, with the passing of many years, and with the changing ownership of the "Illinois country", the site of this battle was lost. Indeed, when we realize the horrible scenes of bloodshed enacted here, the human suffering and untold agony, it might have been well to have made no effort to remove the veil that has so long obscured the horrors of this field. Yet, to the historian, there is a certain lure for complete records, and sentiment is abandoned for the truth. To me, it has been a pleasure to gather from various sources the evidence that so conclusively brings to light a complete story of this long-mysterious battle ground. There in the bosom of the "grand prairie" had been hidden a secret that the ages might never have disclosed.

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Relics found by excavating. Broken gun barrels, gun flints, bullets, war points, knives, copper, axes, bones.



Ancient bullets from this field.
Inset: Original lead slug.



The Battlesite after two hundred years.



LANG-FULLER PHOTO. CO.
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